

March 6, 1964

Dear Mrs. Kennedy:

I write to tell you of an incident--showing your husband's courage and coolness under fire--that may not have been brought to your attention.

It happened on the darkest day of the Cuban crisis, Saturday, October 27th.

Late the evening before, on Friday, the 11th day of the crisis, had come the first break--Khrushchev's four-part cable in which he seemed to propose a withdrawal of his nuclear missiles. With this in hand, the EXCOM met on Saturday morning with some hope that Khrushchev was backing down.

Then, in the middle of the meeting, came a news despatch from Moscow reneging on Friday night's cable. Khrushchev talked about our bases in Turkey, and it seemed likely that the hardliners in the Kremlin, possibly backed by the military, were taking over.

Shortly thereafter, an American U-2 was shot down over Cuba by a surface-to-air missile. The Soviets were apparently bent on a show-down, and, if so, an invasion--with all the possibilities of a spiral into nuclear war--would have to follow.

The EXCOM session broke up around noon, followed by a State Department meeting in Secretary Rusk's office. At the conclusion of this meeting, Secretary Rusk asked me to take to the President a proposed reply to Khrushchev's ten o'clock declaration.

I delivered it to Mac Bundy in the President's outer office shortly after 1:00 p. m., and after some discussion left to return to

Mrs. John F. Kennedy,  
3017 N Street, N. W.,  
Washington, D. C.

the State Department.

As I passed the Guard's desk at the West Executive Entrance, I was told there was an urgent message from my office. I learned that another U-2 on a routine air-sampling mission from Alaska to the North Pole had picked the wrong star for its return flight and was at that moment over the Soviet Union. Soviet fighter planes had scrambled. American fighters in Alaska had also scrambled and were attempting to rendezvous with the U-2 to escort it home.

I ran upstairs and found the President, Mac Bundy and several others in Mrs. Lincoln's office.

The President knew at a glance that something was terribly wrong. Shakily I told my story.

The implications were as obvious as they were horrendous: The Soviets might well regard this U-2 flight as a last-minute intelligence reconnaissance in preparation for nuclear war.

But I will never forget the President's coolness. It was, I am sure, the blackest hour. But where another man may have felt panic, he did not. With a short laugh that broke the tension, he said, "There is always someone who doesn't get the word." "Roger," he said, "make this your project for the next couple of hours. Find out the exact situation and we will deal with it."

That's the story. As a footnote, it might be interesting for you to know that Mac, who knew my physical condition, saw my confused attempts to obey the President's order and then suggested that, since I hadn't been to bed for a couple of days, someone else ought to carry through.

I will send a copy of this letter to Arthur Schlesinger. It may be useful to illustrate what Ernest Hemingway called true courage--grace under pressure.

Sincerely,

Roger Hilsman